The Mantle: Beginning of the End

by Qwerty282

Summary: Everything has its beginning, its roots. Even the end of the galaxy. And none should know this better than the Spartan V 001, Commander Ender Shepherd. Read "An Essential Guide to TheMantleverse: CODEX" first.

    1. Prologue

A/N: Hiya everyone! Old computer crashed, so I caught a break (no more pesky web blocker!) Anyways, I have good news and bad news. Good news is, I now have access to FFN again! YAY! Bad news is, my thumbdrive, and half a month of work with it, crashed... That means I have to re-write Timeline V, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 all over again. That, folks, is also why I am posting this chapter now, instead of last week.

Also, why am I posting this in a new story, and why is Alpha and Omega renamed? Because I felt that the saga would be more organised better this way. That's why.

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><p><em>Prologue: Beginning of the End<em>

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><p>UNSC<em> Valiant<em>-class Light Dreadnought _Everest_
>Relay 147, Epsilon Indi Joint Colonisation System, Human-Yautja Space
2245, July 27, 2593 SET (Standard Earth Time)

The aging Polemarch gazed out of the bridge's viewport, marvelling at the construct of a race long gone. A few million kilometres away, the most efficient form of interstellar transit lay dormant in front of himâ€"a Mass Relay.

How it remained hidden for so long in one of the most contested

systems in the war was currently the hottest topic in the FIL media. Some speculated that it was because of a security oversight by the UNSC or Yautja, others that the Relay was involved in some sort of military conspiracy.

Like most, however, Fleet Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole believed that the Great War was the main reason behind its lack of discovery. The UNSC was simply too busy defending and attacking to look for Relays half a light-year from their star. Another reason was that this was a Prime Relay, not a Secondary one and comparatively rare, as they only linked to one other Prime Relay. Hell, this was the first Prime Relay found after the one connecting Twi'lek territory to Jiralhanae space was discovered and activated by the Federation 34 years ago.

Shaking the stray thoughts from his mind, Cole focused himself on the task at hand: activating the Epsilon Indi Prime Relay and securing the connecting system. Since Sector Five of UNSC space so happened to border unmapped, unexplored space, HIGHCOM had entrusted him with two of the feared _Olympus_-class battlegroups, as well as an additional 2 Frigate Flotillas and 100 _Mako_-class corvettes.

The Yautja had spared no expense either, sending in a _Kryann_-class dreadnought along with her customary cruiser, destroyer and frigate escorts.

"Incoming transmission from Adjudicator Harkh-Va," the Comms officer announced.

Cole sighed—it was time, "Put him onscreen."

The central display blurred and warped into the image of the 5th most powerful person in the Council of Ancients.

"Polemarch Cole," Adjudicator Harkh-Va, Sharp-Blade in the Yautja tongue, dipped his head in a show of respect, "It is good to see you alive and well after your 112th year. Most humans your age would have retired."

"I serve the UNSC, just as you serve the Council," Cole replied, "How was your son's first Hive Cleansing?"

The Adjudicator chuckled, "Very well. He's now an Elite Predator. If the nest had contained 73 more of the Xenomorphs, I would have abdicated control of the clan to him! Either ways, our fleets are ready. The time to activate the Relay has come. We await your orders."

Cole nodded in acknowledgement before terminating the signal, "Comms, send the activation code. Now, once it warms up, send a Clarion spy drone through. I want to see what's on the other side before sending any of my men through."

A chorus of "Aye sir's" were uttered by the occupants of the bridge as they set about their tasks.

"Bring everyone up to Combat Alert Charlie. Prime the Firestorm missiles and make sure our dual MACs are ready to fire. Prepare the 63rd Recon Flotilla to go through as soon as the probe reads all-clear."

Another round of "Aye sir's" was followed by a storm of activity as the heavily modified _Valiant_-class lived up to its design as a fleet coordinator.

"Relay is warmed up, sir. Sending the drone through now!" an Ensign shouted.

Everyone watched in anticipation as the drone disappeared in a flash of blue. Little did anyone know that their act of exploration would shake the galaxy to its very core.

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><p>HSV <em>Byrken<em>-class Dreadnought _Might of Khar'shan_

>Orbit over Torfan
Vaksir System, Outer Batarian Space

Admiral Aizha Mikla'al sat in the command chair of his dreadnought, bored as a slaver in between jobs. Absentmindedly, he wondered what he had done to be assigned to the dead-end job of guarding the Vaksir system.

There were no slavers to worry about since it was the Hegemony that did the slaving, and the Batarians had already secured alliances with the two major merc groups of the Terminus. In other words, he was just there to warm the chair.

All of a sudden, the sensor officer reported energy readings from the dormant Mass Relay in the system. Admiral Mikla'al frownedâ€"that Relay was a Prime Relay, and no one activated Prime Relays as it was against Council law.

Council law required that the offender be heavily punished and its government pay heavy fines. However, there were no ships present near the Relay, designated 147, which meant that someone else was opening it on the other side. Someone else who did not know about the Citadel Council.

"Sir, I'm detecting a spike in energy reading from the Relay! It just shot something into the system, some type of probe, I think," a bridge officer cried, "Sir, it just self-destructed!"

Mikla'al's mouth stretched into a predatory grin. In all likelihood this was merely a young race, new to the stars and only just starting to explore the wider galaxy. If he attacked the upstart race now and enslaved them, not only would the Batarians have access to a large population of slaves and eliminate the need for costly slave raids into Citadel space, his place in upper echelons of the Hegemony would be secured for the foreseeable future! The name of Admiral Aizha Mikla'al would be known for generations!

"Warm up our systems. Comms, get me a fleet-wide comm-link," stated the Admiral, the glee in his voice barely concealed.

"Sir, you're on in five!" the officer in charge of communications shouted.

Mikla'al smiled, "All hands to battle stations!" he cried, "For today, we shall show the galaxy why we are the apex race! Everyone here in this fleet shall be known as the first Batarians to

completely enslave a new race, and our reliance on the pathetic Citadel Council will be over! For the Hegemony!"

He heard the enthusiastic roars of his soldiers before terminating the connection. As his fleet rumbled towards Relay 147, Mikla'al leaned back into his chair. Today was going to be a good day…

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2. Chapter 1: Fourth Contact

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><p>UNSC <em>Valiant<em>-class Light Dreadnought _Everest_

Relay 147, Epsilon Indi Joint Colonisation System

On the other side of Relay 147, Cole and the joint-species fleet sat and watched the feed from the Clarion spy probe as it showed a fleet of alien vessels in orbit over a planet.

"Ops, initiate the probe's self-destruct," Cole commanded, "Comms, send a message to the Ark. Also, prep the First Contact package."

"Aye sir!"

"Helm, fire reverse thrusters, get us facing the relay, maintain our current distance. Athena?"

"Finally, I was wondering when you'd remember me," the A.I. chirped as her avatar materialized on the pedestal nest to Cole.

The A.I. Athena, designated Advanced Coordinator Smart A.I. SMA-3419-8, was Cole's personal attaché and had chosen to take on the form of her namesake. She had curly brown hair which reached her shoulders, partially concealed by the helmet that she wore. She was dressed a flowing Greek chiton, and an aegis was draped over her shoulders.

"Of course I would. Athena, I need you to link with the other ships. Order the two _Olympus_'s to flank the Relay in a pincer, defensive phalanx formation. Spread our _Mako_'s throughout the fleet in wolfpacks of 10. Get the 24th into position above the Relay. Sent the package to the 63rd and have them go through the Relay, attack formation Delta. Get me a line with Rear Admiral Steven Hackett."

The Rear Admiral's youthful face appeared on the central display.

"Polemarch Cole, sir!" he saluted.

Cole returned the salute, "Rear Admiral Hackett. You have some of the fastest ships in this fleet, so I'm entrusting you to make first contact. If all goes well, let me know and I'll pass on the message to HIGHCOM; if it falls apart, I want you to bug out. I don't know anything about those alien ships, but I don't think your frigates can keep them off. Just fire a few shots then jump, the heavy fleets can take care of them."

"Aye, sir."

"Good luck, son. Cole out," the Polemarch terminated the connection.

The viewscreen depolarized just in time for Cole to watch as Rear Admiral Hackett's flotilla disappeared into bluish smudges as the Relay propelled them a hundred lightyears across space.

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><p>STG stealth corvette USV <em>Tread Careful<em>

Vaksir System, Batarian space

To say that the corvette was in a state of chaos was an understatement. The 10 Salarians manning the craft were scrambling everywhere. Orders and status updates were barked every few seconds, and data printouts littered every visible surface in the bridge.

"Sir, intercepted message from fleet to Torfan government!"

"Sir, Batarians are charging Mass Accelerators!"

"Lieutenant, the drone is in position!"

"Put the feed on the main display! Mordin! Status of Batarian fleet?"

Lieutenant Kirrahe's words tumbled out in a blur of barely comprehensible syllables.

"Mobilising quickly. Currently 20 cruisers, 100 frigates clustered around dreadnoughts _Light of Khar'shan_, _Vindictive Spirit_," the 2nd Lieutenant replied in an equally hurried tone.

"Sir! Detecting spike in Relay energy!" a pause, "Sir, detecting 25 unknown signatures, size tagged as cruisers."

"Get me a line with the Council! Priority Alpha-1!" Kirrahe shouted, "If they are busy, tell them it's an issue that can't be ignored!"

"Link established, sir!"

The holographic projections of the three most powerful leaders in the known galaxy sprang up in front of the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Kirrahe. What information have you uncovered that warrants you interrupting our talk with the Volus ambassador?" the Salarian councillor, Naios, was quick and to the point as usual.

"I concur. What have you found?" Sparatus, councillor for the Turians joined in.

"Councillors, it appears as if the Batarians have found a new race. Judging from how their fleet is reacting, it seems Batarians have every intention of it ending in bloodshed."

Shock and dread showed on the councillors' faces for a second before Tevos, the Asari representative, responded, "That's bad news. What exactly happened?"

"Apparently, new race activated Prime Relay 314 and sent probe through, which self-destructed a few moments later. Batarians began mobilising and moving toward Relay, typical attack formation. Then, new race sent 25 cruiser analogues through Relay. Batarians are still charging weapons, though they've slowed advance."

Sparatus did not seem impressed, "Technically, those upstarts broke a Council law," under the withering glare of the Asari Matriarch, he hurriedly added, "That they would not have known of, whichâ€"I supposeâ€"technically exempts themâ€¦" he grumbled.

Tevos turned her attention back to the STG operative, "Lieutenant, do you have any videos which you can show us?"

"Affirmative. Have drone in position, sending live feed now."

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><p>Council Chambers, Presidium Ring<p>

Citadel, Serpent Nebula, Council space

In the Council Chambers, the main display hummed to life as the almost-live feed from the STG spy drone played out in front of them.

Twenty-five gunmetal greyâ€¦ _blocks_ broke apart into 5 distinct groups before coming to a stop. The 122 Batarian ships broke into 20 groups before doing the same. The odds did not appear to be in favour of the new race. It seemed like the Batarians would have their way with the new race by the time a Council fleet got there.

Not that they wouldn't try though. A combined Council fleet was already preparing to depart from the Citadel under the command of Matriarch Lidanya.

25 cruisers against 2 dreadnoughts and 20 wolfpacks, Councillor Tevos' face paled, _Goddess help them if it goes wrong._

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25 frigates against 2 cruisers and 20 frigates with corvette support, Hackett thought, _God help me if this goes to hell._

As soon as his flotilla decelerated, he immediately split them into five wolfpacks of 5, each centred around one of the _Dusk_-class Heavy Frigates.

Hackett inhaled, then exhaled deeply, "Comms, send the First Contact Package."

"Aye sir, broadcasting Package on all wavelengths. All we have to do now is wait, sir."

5 seconds passed. Then 10. 15. The tension on the bridge was so thick it was suffocating.

"Sir, detecting a spike in energy readings from the unknown vessels! I think they're about to-"

Suddenly, the ship rocked violently as lights flickered and warning klaxons began sounding. Crewmen were thrown from their feet. Around the ship, a golden shimmer appeared briefly as the kinetic energy of 3 Mass Accelerator rounds were absorbed and dispersed.

The Admiral picked himself up, hand clenched over his shoulder as a drop of crimson blood rolled down his forehead, "Status report!"

"Our shields are holding at 41.83%! Frigates _Soyuz_ and _Lance Held High_ report that their shields are down! Wolfpacks B and D both sustained the least damage. All other ships report shields are 50% or over!"

"Initiate Cole Protocol fleet-wide! Evasive manoeuvres! Order all ships to fire one MAC volleyâ€"two MA volleys for the _Stalwart_- and _Dawn_-classes! Prime and fire all missile pods! Get wolfpacks B through D to cover A and E while they jump! Concentrate fire on the cruisers!"

"Aye sir!"

The UNSC ships opened fire as one, the heavy MAC slugs tearing straight through the Batarian ships like a hot knife through butter. Eezo rounds peppered the fleet, blue shields flaring as the 5-ton projectiles found their marks. Swarms of Firestorm and Archer

missiles screamed through the vacuum before detonating violently against the Batarian shields, plasma from the Firestorms splashing over and melting the battle plating. Dozens of ships fell in the first few seconds of the onslaught.

The Batarians returned fire without hesitation, the multitude of projectiles swarming the smaller UNSC flotilla. One of the frigates fell under the sustained barrage and went critical, its reactor detonating violently and consuming the vessel in nuclear fire. Another two sported gaping holes where the Mass Accelerator rounds had punched clean through as they drifted aimlessly in the void of space.

Suddenly, the tell-tale purple discs of slipspace ruptures appeared in front of several UNSC vessels, then another, and another. As the 12 ships sailed through, each portal winked shut behind them, leaving the Batarians absolutely no clue as to what just happened and 10 Salarians scrambling around like ants under a magnifying glass.

The battle, however, was unfinished as the remaining 2 UNSC wolfpacks opened fire with all they had, the kinetic rounds smashing into the Batarian fleet with 72.59 kilotons of force before they too disappeared into the chaos of slipspace.

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><p>Tevos' face paled as she watched the last alien cruiser disappear into one of those… <em>things<em>. The alien fleet appeared outgunned and outmatched by the Batarian fleet, but managed to deliver a thrashing before mysteriously vanishing. And they used plasma. _Plasma!_

Beside her, she heard Naios muttering about theoretical impossibilities and something about the mass of the projectiles. Sparatus was currently griping about the power of the weapons and how he was going to extract every one of the upstart species' military secrets when they joined the Council.

Meanwhile, all the Asari councillor could think was, _63 Batarians ships for 3 of those cruisers. What on Thessia were they dealing with?_

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><p>Cole gritted his teeth as Rear Admiral Hackett's report flashed on his screen. The Adjudicator's hologram next to him uttered a slur of Yautja curses as the tell-tale glow of biotics danced across his skin. Yet another war with another unknown race. Was humanity truly condemned to face enemies at every turn in its history?<p>

Straightening his back and shaking the stray thoughts from his mind, he ordered, "Get me a line with Onyx! I want every ship in this fleet at Combat Alert Alpha! Athena, get the two _Olympus_-class battlegroups on our flanks, escort formation Bravo. Adjudicator Harkh-Va, have your battlegroup fall in behind ours, where your ships will deal the most damage. Alert Sectors 7 and 3 to this situation."

The aging Fleet Admiral cleared his throat before speaking, "As of

now, the Federation is at war with this new alien species. We will make them rue the day they crossed us! Us, the inheritors of the Mantle of Responsibility! Us, protectors of the galaxy and all life therein! We, who have fought tooth and nail for peace, which these meddlers have so gleefully destroyed! They want war? Let us show them the true meaning of war!"

As the Yautja cheered and his crew joined in, Cole stared impassively out of the bridge, fire burning in his eyes, as his fleet powered towards the Relay. He was Fleet Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole, Polemarch of the United Nations Space Navy and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federation of Independent Species, and he would bring his enemies hell.

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><p>AN: Credit for the Firestorm missile system goes to Havoc-legionnaire and has been used with his permission. For those of you familiar with his Halo: Art of War story, you can look forward to more stuff designed by him coming very soon.

I've also reclassified the _Valiant_-class as a light dreadnought, cause frankly, it's too OP for a cruiser, which functions as a small, fast capital ship in modern times. The _Everest_ is neither, so I changed canon to actually keep the classifications correct. If there's one thing Halo got wrong, it's the role of their ships and the classifications. Since when does a 2 km behemoth qualify as a "Super-Heavy Cruiser"? BAH!

Anyways, hope you enjoyed this chapter and I look forward to your reviews!

Qwerty282 out!

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